

Book Review

Alain L. Locke: The Biography of a Philosopher

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Leonard Harris and Charles Molesworth, *Alain L. Locke: The Biography of a Philosopher*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008. xv + 432 pp. ISBN 0226317765. \$36.00 (hbk.)

Alain Locke was for many years a much neglected philosopher, whose importance not only for African American culture but also for the fields of value theory, critical race theory, and aesthetics was generally overlooked, eclipsed by the towering figure of his older and more famous contemporary, W. E. B. DuBois. In recent years there has been a revival of philosophical interest in Locke, largely through the tireless efforts of Leonard Harris, who edited a collection of Locke's critical texts and a collection of essays on Locke's philosophy, which Harris described as critical pragmatism. It was Harris who first told me about Locke and urged me to read him, and I remain grateful for his doing so. The more I read Locke and the more I learned about his seminal role in the Harlem Renaissance and the development of African America artistic culture and race theory, the more I was amazed that there was no biography devoted to him. Like many others, I urged Harris to provide one as an essential part of establishing Locke's intellectual importance and sustaining his legacy. It is a very welcome event for both American philosophy and cultural studies that Harris, together with Charles Molesworth, has finally provided us with a most substantial and carefully researched intellectual biography of Locke.

Harris is a philosopher while Molesworth is a professor of English literature, and this interdisciplinary combination works well here and is, moreover, exceedingly suitable to its topic. For Locke himself effectively straddled the fields of philosophy and literature, teaching for most of his career as a philosophy professor at Howard University, but steadily churning out more literary criticism (along with music and art criticism) than texts of academic philosophy. Locke occasionally

described his philosophical genius in terms of being a midwife to cultural and artistic progress, and this biography carefully traces Locke's career as a philosopher of culture and as a cultural critic, but also as someone for whom culture also had a primary personal meaning—the duty of self-culture, a melioristic drive for continual education and cultivation.

The book's narrative structure is straightforward and chronological, consisting of twelve chapters. It begins with a thorough exploration of Locke's background and early life in Philadelphia, where he was born in 1885, the only child of a well-educated Negro couple who themselves were well-educated freeborn blacks. They instilled in their son Allan (who later, through his taste for dandyism, changed his name to the French Alain) a love of learning and ambition for self-improvement. Locke was a small and sickly child who suffered from a heart condition brought about by a case of rheumatic fever, and he was apparently spoiled by his mother, who remained very close to Locke and often traveled with him in his adult years. This chapter includes Locke's early academic success at Central High School in Philadelphia, and the book then moves to chapters on his studies at Harvard, his further studies in Oxford and Berlin, and then his career as an American academic and cultural critic. There are two chapters on his academic life at Howard, a chapter on his role in the Harlem Renaissance and editing of the influential anthology *The New Negro*, a chapter on the impact of that book and the movement it helped generate. These are followed by chapters that discuss his substantial work as an art critic focusing on African American achievement and as an agent for stimulating new African American artistic creation. The final chapters describe Locke's work as a theorist of education and democracy (where his theories of race, already noted in earlier chapters, are given further treatment) and then recount his final years of activity, concluding with a chapter on his legacy that brings us up to contemporary times.

The book convincingly demonstrates how Locke's intellectual career in philosophy was always primarily concerned with three major topics that he closely integrated in his work: the nature of value, race relations, and aesthetic experience. It was one of Locke's hopes, and in a less direct way Dewey's, that through the powerful values generated through aesthetic experience differently identified races could come to an improved appreciation of each other and achieve improved interaction which would in turn generate improved artistic creation, through such mixing, thus leading to even more enhanced aesthetic experience and better racial relations. Locke's love of Negro culture was matched by a love of European culture that propelled Locke to extended stays in Oxford and Berlin (far beyond what was needed for his studies), and throughout his life he took every opportunity to spend time in Europe, soaking in its music, museums, and intellectual offerings. His mastery of both European and African American artistic traditions was necessary for the work of cultural mediation that he performed as a public intellectual, but also reflects his personal commitment to enriched personal cultivation through efforts of intercultural mixing and his faith in the aesthetic power of the mix.

Mixing is not always easy, since combining diversity often creates tension between the different elements that pull in different directions. It requires a certain talent to turn such opposition into productive, creative tensions, and Locke's life undeniably displayed such talent. Indeed, besides combining Eurocentric and African-based culture, Locke's career seems essentially structured on a further series of tensions that he integrated into a productive personality and professional-cultural *mélange*. First, from the time of his high school and college studies, Locke experienced a tension between the pursuit of literary studies toward a career in writing and the pursuit of a career as an academic philosopher. Rather than choosing only one direction, Locke became an academic philosopher whose bulk of writing was devoted to literary, musical, and art criticism, and who maintained extremely close connections with leading African American writers, often playing a significant role in their careers. Locke's work was also pervaded by a further tension between his commitment to recovering the past racial tradition of African and African American folk arts and a contrasting commitment to the assertion and establishment of a new cultural tradition (that of the New Negro and of the future interracial American culture to which New Negro cultural would contribute) that was not yet formed.

Another important tension in Locke was that between cultural elitism (with an uncompromising insistence on excellence and the highest aesthetic values and achievements) and between a strong democratic commitment and insistence on cultural pluralism. Locke often antagonized the African American community (including some of its best authors and artists) by his very high standards, which he demonstrated in candid and often sharp critique of the artistic work he discussed in his frequent critical essays and reviews. Yet this insistence on excellence was combined with the democratic demand that all people should have access to superior culture and that even stumbling steps on the way to such culture should be strongly encouraged though combined with critical directions about where such cultural efforts needed to be improved. Locke devoted a great deal of energy and thought to continuing adult education as part of his commitment to make the best of culture more accessible to all people. Still, his notion of democracy and his political temperament was not as radical as that of DuBois, nor was his aesthetic taste and style. Locke was often accused of effete snobbism and was apparently known in Harlem as "the Proust of Lennox Avenue." This biography gives details of how Locke's dandyism and efforts of refinement went back to his Oxford days, where he got into economic troubles because of his expensive tastes (for fine clothes, dining, and even riding lessons). He himself recognized in himself a deeply bred culturally conservative and elitist tendency that he attributed to his Philadelphia background and that prevented him from more radical leftist politics and populist cultural advocacy and propaganda. His debate with DuBois over the issue of art and propaganda is instructively explored in this biography.

A final formative tension and *mélange* that structured Locke's career was that between was that between his commitment to self-culture and perfectionism versus his concern and service for the racial group to which he belonged. Personally,

he might have preferred to concentrate his efforts on his own aesthetic development and concentrated on his personal tastes, but he worked tirelessly to present, analyze, and constructively criticize the arts of African American culture. As an academic philosopher, Locke had long realized that race had no objective, biological reality but was rather a sociohistorical construction, but that did not mean, in pragmatic terms, that it was a mere fiction. As it pragmatically was used to degrade and oppress certain groups, race, in Locke's view, conversely could and needed to be deployed to advance those oppressed groups by highlighting and developing their cultural achievements. Locke's life, as carefully recounted in this biography, was a project of carefully balancing his pursuits as an academic philosopher, an aesthete, a cultural critic, and a race leader.

This biography is essentially an intellectual biography, prudently driven by concentration on clearly demonstrable facts and focusing mainly on Locke's writings and public roles. There is much less in the way of imaginative speculation about Locke's inner thoughts and psychological struggles. Reading this book gave me a very strong sense of Locke's family background, education, aesthetic interests, philosophical preoccupations and theories, critical views, and political, cultural, and educational activism, all of which should be interesting to Dewey scholars. But I did not get much sense of Locke's personality and inner life; yet Locke himself insists that one's philosophy reflects "the lineaments of a personality." Perhaps this was because the authors, as academic scholars, wanted to concentrate on the many objective facts of his rich career, and perhaps Locke himself may have carefully tried to maintain a more distanced, impersonal persona to protect his sense of dignity and his private life, which was complicated by his homosexuality. This fine biography instructively reveals that Locke felt that the contingent conditions of his birth made him an oppressed minority in three different ways: not only in terms of his Negro race (in an essentially white American culture), but also in his homosexuality (which he thought would have not been a problem in ancient Greece) and his very short stature (which he remarked would have been average had he been born in Japan).

Let me close with a personal remark. I was pleased to see that Harris and Molesworth conclude the book's final chapter on Locke's legacy with the inauguration of Philadelphia's first Alain Locke Day, celebrated at a conference whose opening event was held in Locke's high school, Central High, on April 16, 1999. As chair of Temple's Philosophy Department, which organized the event, I was happy to introduce Leonard Harris as its keynote speaker, and I am still happier to see that Harris's dedication to Locke has been joined by that of Charles Molesworth to produce a work that will ably serve Locke's legacy for generations to come.

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